

## Introduction

### Taking Racism Seriously

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## INTRODUCTION: Taking Racism Seriously.

Nanna Kirstine Leets Hansen & Julia Suárez-Krabbe

*It is easy to blur the truth with a simple linguistic trick: start your story from “Secondly.” Yes, this is what Rabin did. He simply neglected to speak of what happened first. Start your story with “Secondly,” and the world will be turned upside-down. Start your story with “Secondly,” and the arrows of the Red Indians are the original criminals and the guns of the white men are entirely the victims. It is enough to start with “Secondly” for the anger of the black man against the white to be barbarous. Start with “Secondly” and Ghandi becomes responsible for the tragedies of the British. You only need to start your story with “Secondly” and the burned Vietnamese will have wounded the humanity of the napalm, and Victor Jara’s songs will be the shameful thing and not Pinochet’s bullets, which killed so many thousands in the Santiago stadium. It is enough to start the story with “Secondly” for my grandmother, Umm ‘Ata, to become the criminal and Ariel Sharon her victim.*

- Mourid Barghouti, I saw Ramallah

This issue of KULT on racism in Denmark challenges a tendency in Danish debates and research on racism to start the story from “secondly”. From this position of “secondly”, calling out racism and racist attitudes become false “accusations” which are seen as preposterous. From this position, the one(s) being called out “had no intention of being racist”. When starting with “secondly”, racialized peoples’ claims to the right to self-determination becomes unjust, and difference is turned into an argument for not taking seriously their experiences and knowledges. To talk about racism from “secondly” leads to arguments such as those that imply that including racism in the conversation is missing the point, it is taking things out of their rightful context, it is being over-sensitive, and above all, it is being racist in itself. Hence, when starting from “secondly”, the existence of racism is rarely acknowledged as the premise of the conversation, and as a central social problem to take seriously in research and knowledge production. Rather, as the dominant logic starts from “secondly”, it demands

proving that racism actually exists and justifying its relevance beyond a few cases that are seen as extreme and isolated. Such silencing mechanisms support notions of white supremacy and privilege, they close down possibilities for social and political change, and they lead to social and political death.

Consequently, to start the story from “firstly” means defying the silencing mechanisms that invisibilize, conceal and legitimize racism and fragment the discussion and the racialized groups addressing this problem. Starting from “firstly” means understanding that racism is a globalized structure which ties back to European colonialism, and that this global structure localizes in particular ways. To start from “firstly” is to accentuate that racism is a real problem with severe consequences, and that race as a structural principle of hierarchization continues to inform public debates, policy making, knowledge production and everyday interaction. Additionally, starting from “firstly” means being unapologetically complicit with anti-racism, among others by dedicating space to the voices which, in spite of the abovementioned silencing mechanisms, raise the crucial debates about how race, racism, and the processes of racialization have been constituted historically and still shape political, social, legal, and economic relations in contemporary Denmark (e.g. in relation to Afrophobia, Islamophobia, coloniality, everyday racism). Recognizing that the strongest struggles against racism are currently taking place in activist circles - most often activist circles consisting of different racialized groups - the issue breaks with the academic insularity and complicity with racism to the extent it includes poems, essays and reflection pieces written by activists, writers and artists. Taking particular interest in in-depth analyses that contribute to expand our knowledge of how this global structure localizes in Denmark, we hope that the issue will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the multiple ways in which race and racism impacts us in our lives, and shapes the society we live in.

## **Racism**

In spite of an increasing interest in the problem of racism, Danish academia has been reluctant, slow and embarrassingly uninformed in its approach to it. Indeed, even though recent research has argued for the importance of including race and racialization as analytical categories in the Danish as well as the Nordic contexts (see e.g. Andreassen, Henningsen & Myong Petersen 2008, Andreassen & Vitus 2016, Suárez-Krabbe 2016, Keskinen et. al 2009), much of the research on racism is conducted on the basis of a few canonized theoretical sources and methodological approaches, thereby ignoring and invisibilizing the vastness in the field, including its groundbreaking theories and methodologies.

Indeed, we see a general tendency to avoid or only peripherally conceptualize race as an analytical, theoretical and methodological point of departure, and to privilege white perspectives on race and racism over the contributions of racialized peoples across the (academic) world.

The above does not imply that the scholarship on racism in Denmark is unimportant. Overall, it can be divided into two broad, sometimes intersecting, fields: critical whiteness studies and racism studies. The first has largely dealt with whiteness (and color-blindness) in relation to nationalism and Danishness (Hervik & Jørgensen 2002, Hervik 2001), whiteness in relation to gender, normativity and subjectivity (Andreassen, Henningsen & Myong Petersen 2008, Myong 2009), whiteness and affect (Andreassen & Vitus 2016, Smedegaard Nielsen 2015), and whiteness discussed through a postcolonial lens (Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012, Andersen, Hvenegård-Lassen & Knobbloch 2015). The second field on racism studies tends to understand racism as a question of processes of categorization happening through *representation*, and hence focus is often on the media and/or discourse, and include considerations about some of the important intersecting economic, social and political aspects of racism as expressed in discourse (fx. Andreassen 2007, Henkel 2010, Hussain et al 1997). Yet, there is a need to address several blind spots produced within these fields of research.

While many of the above mentioned studies in both fields recognize that processes of categorization and representation may obey particular elite interests, they engage less with the material, epistemic and historical configurations of the racist structures of power, including epistemic racism and the ways in which the university and the educational system are part of the problem. Thus, they often reproduce epistemic racism.

Further, when talking about structural racism, there is a tendency to pay more attention to the particularities of Danish racism, and less to the structural generalities of global racism. This means that (Danish) racism's intimate connection with colonialism, imperialism, capitalism and patriarchy is only studied to a minor extent (examples of studies that engage particularly with this relation are Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012, Suárez-Krabbe 2019, and Andersen, Hvenegård-Lassen & Knobbloch 2015). Indeed, racism is a single - and very complex - global system of oppression that, among others, rests upon the management and control of diversity. One of its main characteristics is its ability to adapt to its surroundings, and hence to localize in different ways that may seem unique -when starting the story from "secondly". Thus, when racism is studied as a particularity, its historical emergence and the continuous, albeit changing, shapes that racial hierarchy takes in Denmark, gets lost. Indeed, engaging in discussions concerning that very history implies understanding that racism targets dissimilar populations differently. This is one of the core reasons why it is important to study Islamophobia, Afrophobia, racism against Inuit and other indigenous populations, racism against adoptees, mixed-race people, refugees, migrants, Roma, Latinxs, and discrimination practices and

imaginaries in relation to southern Europeans, among many others (Grosfoguel 2004, Suárez-Krabbe 2014, 2017), without implying that these differences are by any means ‘exceptional’, nor by engaging in futile discussions about whether one is worse or more racist than others (cf Fanon 2008). This special issue is illustrative of such distinction. As such, the different articles, poems, essays and reflection pieces should be read as relating different aspects of the same complex problem. Hence, besides providing insights of the nuances and complexities of racism in Denmark, they also contribute to discussions on the ways in which race works as a structural and global principle of hierarchization. Such nuances are important in order to open up spaces for analysing further the material, political, social and epistemic consequences of racism and strengthen our struggles against them.

## Death

Racism pertains “the state-sanctioned and/or legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies (Gilmore 2007: 28). Death, according to Gilmore, is “multidimensional, embracing corporal death, social death, and civil death” (Davis 2012: 175).

That death is multidimensional is evident in Zanubia A. Omar’s poems “Lost” and “Home”. Through her poems she explains death as being both physical, emotional and existential, and shows how social death equals becoming invisible and disposable even to one self.

Where Zanubia A. Omar’s poems discuss death mostly in relation to the impact it has on racialized subjectivities, José Arce’s and Julia Suárez-Krabbe’s article “Racism, Global Apartheid and Disobedient Mobilities: The Politics of Detention and Deportation in Europe and Denmark” links the fate of individuals to global racist structures. The use of the term *global apartheid* underlines the legal and material nature of this structure. Their analysis of the ways in which state violence, in particular camps and border control, are used as tools to discipline, control and reproduce global inequalities for the benefit of the global North, further shows how the structures legitimizing these tools have been produced by colonialism.

This special issue also includes a podcast from the Bridge Radio entitled “Black Lives Matter: African Homeless, State Racism and Police Violence” that discusses police violence and racial exploitation with Black bottle collectors in Copenhagen. Together, the poems, the radio podcast, and the article underline how military and economic power, since the beginning of European colonialism have been combined with social, political, legal and ideological power in order to subject racialized

populations to premature death, or confine them in what Mbembe (2010) has called death-worlds (see also Suárez-Krabbe 2016: 4).

## Power

Racism, then, regards the structural production of death. This production of death is an ontological process intrinsically linked to the power to negate the humanity of certain peoples, to relegate them to the zone of non-being (Fanon 1967). Death as an ontological process also requires the continuous reproduction of the power structures that uphold the racist hierarchisation of peoples. As mentioned earlier, racist power structures also work on an epistemic level. Hence, knowledge production is always a political undertaking. Works by Aime Cesaire, Angela Davis, Aníbal Quijano, Audre Lorde, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Frantz Fanon, Lewis Gordon, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí and Talal Asad (to name just very few of the central and often neglected scholars in Danish research on racism) all remind us that dominant thinking, rationality, and knowledge production is itself part of the problem.

The article “Denmark’s Innocent Colonial Narrative” by Gabriella Isadora Nørgaard Muasya, Noella Chituka Birisawa & Tringa Berisha indeed shows how knowledge production is never innocent but rather is shaped by coloniality. Through an analysis of the educational game *Historiedysten* from 2016 published by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) they demonstrate how the articulation between capitalism, patriarchy and racism is reproduced in the way knowledge about the Danish colonial history is constructed first and foremost through the eyes of the coloniser. When knowledge is produced in this way, they underline, it becomes possible to uphold a white, innocent narrative of Danishness without having to critically scrutinize the violence, oppression and racism that underlie this construction.

The terms upon which knowledge is produced, as well as its consequences, is also a main concern in Björn Hakon Lingner’s article “Dansk kolonialisme og race – repræsentationer af den ikke-hvide anden i *Vore gamle Tropekolonier*”. His analysis of the representation of non-whites in literature about the Danish colonial history demonstrates how whiteness, colonialism and racism intermingle with discourses of Denmark as white and allegedly non-racist. As such, they limit the possibilities of discussing race and racism as real issues. By addressing the power structures embedded in knowledge production and situating this discussion in a larger historical framework that takes colonialism and coloniality seriously, the two articles offer important insights into how racism localizes in Denmark

on an epistemic level, at the same time as they also relate to the globalized and historically constituted legacies upon which this localization rests.

## Silencing

As highlighted earlier in the introduction, silencing is one of the ways in which racism is legitimized and its structures perpetuated. Silencing implies speaking about, but not with, racialized groups that conceptualize, resist and challenge racism, capitalism and patriarchy in local, national, international and global settings. Such mechanisms are expressed in the way authority of sources is defined first and foremost through unspoken but very clear criteria that understand legitimacy, expertise and objectivity as being equal with the disregard of race and racism, and one's own positionality within its structures. As when it is seen as unproblematic that those summoned and regarded as legitimate sources to speak about refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, Blacks and Muslims or the presence of colonial subjects within European borders are most often the white -or white-washed- ones.

In Benjamin Kold Rosenkilde's essay "And the Oscar goes to..." the question of representation is considered in relation to colorblindness and his own position as a white young man. He uses this outset to discuss the ways in which racism is evident in public debates, in Denmark and the US, that supposedly address racism. This discussion speaks into scholarly and activist debates on colorblindness as a silencing mechanism upheld by the idea that "race does not matter". As argued by Hervik (2001), newer expressions of color-blindness are reproduced through a collective fantasy about all people being equal in Denmark, even though "Danishness" as a normative ideal is constituted as white. Similarly, Andreassen (2007) points out how whiteness is indeed constituted as a fundamental premise for the understanding of the Danish nation and one's belonging in Denmark. As such, colorblindness conceals how processes of inclusion and exclusion are based on racial differentiation while at the same time making attempts to talk about experiences with racial discrimination seem absurd. It is a racial ideology and "a mode of thinking about race organized around an effort to not 'see', or at any rate not to acknowledge, race differences" (Frankenberg 1993, 142). According to Myong (2009) this makes it impossible to speak about race as a structural and everyday phenomenon. However, taking race, racism and one's own position(ing) within these structures seriously precisely allows understanding its complexity and how it shapes the (very possibility of) interactions between people.

Significantly, silencing also entails *the past* (Trouillot 1995). Lars Jensen's contribution to this issue reviews five volumes on Danish colonialism published in 2017 in light of this dimension: silencing specific aspects of history entails a positionality that is invisibilized, and depends on the active choice to ignore the structural and globalized levels of racism and colonialism. These levels, and the historical-structural dimension of silencing, is also present in Shelley Moorhead's keynote (audio file) at Roskilde University on March 20, 2017 on whiteness and reparations in relation to the former Danish US Virgin Islands. With these interventions, the deep legacies of colonial and racist structures come to the fore, displaying the historical, structural, epistemic, material, political, subjective and existential violence inherent to these legacies.

## Violence

Racism as a globalized structure is inherently violent. It violently imposes itself on everyday interactions between peoples and produces stress, anxiety, fatigue and illness, among the more corporeal consequences, in racialized subjects. As pointed out by Philomena Essed (2008: 448), everyday racism,

...is not a singular act in itself, but the accumulation of small inequities. Expressions of racism in one particular situation are related to all other racist practices and can be reduced to three strands of everyday racism, which interlock as a triangle of mutually dependent processes: (1) The *marginalization* of those identified as racially or ethnically different; (2) the *problematization* of other cultures and identities; and (3) symbolic or physical *repression* of (potential) resistance through humiliation or violence.

Several of the contributions in this issue touch on racism in the everyday and the ways in which it shapes intersubjective relations through violence.

Andrew Shield's article "Looking for north Europeans only": Identifying Five Racist Patterns in an Online Subculture" shows how racism also shapes the ways in which social and/or sexual interaction takes place, is negotiated or controlled through online everyday interaction, focusing two dating platforms that cater primarily to men seeking men.

Naja Dyrendom Graugaard's poetic reflections entitled "Stills" depict how racism and violence are intrinsic parts of the everyday of Inuit populations; in this case, her own family, including her small children. The reflections challenge racism, among others by displaying the violence embedded in cultural appropriation and racial stereotypes which are backed by a discourse on colorblindness



and ‘innocence’ in Danish Kindergartens. The stills can be read or listened to as they are read out loud and interpreted by readers with experiences as individuals in and of families of colour.

Finally, Lesley-Ann Brown’s two contributions eloquently display otherwise ignored aspects of racism in Denmark. In the poem “Black Girl’s Survival Guide” Brown speaks from her position as a Black woman in Copenhagen, showing how she is made ‘invisible’ and ‘inexistent’ in the very ways the city does not cater to her: the city is simply not made for her to inhabit it, and it constantly relegates her to a zone of non-being. The poem is also a powerful resistance to racism and its silencing and invisibilizing mechanisms by affirming her voice and refusing to be ignored, at the same time displaying how her experience is not individual but collective. The chapter “The Road to Hossein” is an excerpt from Brown’s recently published book, *Decolonial Daughter: Letters from a Black Woman to Her European Son* (Repeater Books, 2018). A finely woven tapestry reflecting on how racism works upon racialized groups differently, yet still violently and impacting our everyday, our interactions, our energy and dreams, and producing depression, exhaustion, anxiety, and stress among us.

### **Complicity - final remarks**

As mentioned earlier, defying “secondly” in relation to race and racism also means addressing the mutual influences and links between the political, the media and the academic world. As implied above, there is a whole industry of academic production concerning “discrimination”, “integration”, “migration”, “mobility”, “radicalization” that study “about them but without them” (Nimako 2012) that is intimately connected to, and complicit with, racism. Along with Nimako, numerous intellectuals (especially those from the global south) have pointed out that there is a striking reluctance among academics to take stock of how they are and have been complicit with racism, including dehumanization, segregation, and apartheid. An interesting exception in the Scandinavian context is the edited book by Keskinen, Tuori, Irni and Mulinari (2009), that explores some of the aspects of academic complicity in racism and coloniality.

In our view, there is an urgent need to address this aspect of racism even more, including how it is reproduced in curricula, pedagogical practices, recruitment practices, and everyday racism by white students and faculty towards students and faculty of color. Although this is not the central focus of this special issue, we still hope to provoke debate on these issues and hence also to unsettle possibly comfortable positions among racism scholars and other scholars in Denmark who proclaim themselves to be anti-racist. We also hope that this discussion will spill over into debates among anti-

racists that take comfort in ‘being against’ racism without engaging seriously in the vast amount of scholarship on the problem, namely that produced by scholars, activists, artists and other intellectuals of colour, and who refuse to risk their status, career, and authority in the public realm as well as inside the university by challenging racism effectively.

This special issue provides a point of departure for such debates by showing that racism is a structural problem that affects our everyday lives and possibilities very concretely, even by producing death. It also makes manifest how racism also takes place on an epistemological level, where naturalised ways of thinking (and of positioning oneself) shape what we see and what we do not, what we regard as legitimate, and what we regard as irrelevant. Perhaps above all, the issue shows how taking racism seriously involves understanding how it positions us differently, and it involves positioning ourselves actively against it not simply in theory, but especially in practice.

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